

Conclusions

1. Introduction

The aim of this volume is based on the four aims described in the introduction:

- to consider the state of the art concerning research on Religious Education,
- to critically review existing research,
- to bring together insights on teaching and learning,
- to develop (methodological) criteria and perspectives for future research in this field.

All four aims were to be addressed with a focus on researching classroom processes and outcomes in Religious Education. This implies that those research approaches were of special interest which include some kind of observation or documentation of teaching and learning which can be observed in the classroom on the one hand, and some kind of capturing or measuring the effects and the effectiveness of Religious Education as indicated by learning results on the other hand. The motivation for asking about such research comes from the practice of Religious Education in the shape of three realisations. First, just like with any kind of human action, good intentions are not enough. Second, teaching and learning can and should be improved, in Religious Education no less than in other fields of teaching and learning. And third, the respective insights from general educational research concerning classroom processes and outcomes should be taken seriously for Religious Education as well but, at the same time, they must be translated into the subject-oriented didactics of Religious Education.

At the end of this volume it seems appropriate to ask about possible conclusions that can be drawn from the various contributions in the different chapters. Quite naturally, a discussion volume like the present one cannot be expected to yield final results in the sense of establishing a certain methodology or of defining directions for the understanding and the practice of future research in religious education. Yet even if the intention for the different chapters was a presentation of research projects or of reports concerning the state of research in different countries or particular religious traditions, it makes sense to consider a number of aspects which may be of interest to all those who are committed to advancing research in the field of religious education.

Following the main emphasis of the present volume, we will first offer a number of observations concerning research on processes and outcomes in Religious Education, i. e., the school subject which goes by this name. In a second step, we will describe a number of insights which go beyond this limited scope. Finally, we will describe a number of perspectives for the future.

2. Researching processes and outcomes in Religious Education

From the beginning, it has not been our intention to introduce a new normative model of research in religious education by suggesting to make classroom processes and outcomes the exclusive center of this research. However, we did indeed expect that the actual amount of research available concerning this research focus is rather limited and that one can speak, at best, of an emerging approach. According to the reports from the countries referred to in this volume, this expectation appears to be correct. Rather little is known from research about what is really happening in the classroom during Religious Education lessons, what kind of teaching and learning approaches and processes can be found there, if these approaches and processes are adequate and effective, etc. Moreover, the actual outcomes of teaching and learning in Religious Education are not really known, at least not on the basis of valid critical research. This observation is of considerable weight in that the invitation to contribute to this volume was based on prior information about existing research or ongoing research projects. In other words, it was the intention to capture as many existing studies on processes and outcomes in Religious Education as possible. Moreover, colleagues from those countries were invited to contribute in which respective research traditions have been known to exist.

While this first observation may be considered sobering or even disappointing, our second observation certainly is more encouraging. As a number of the contributions to this volume clearly show, there are very interesting beginnings in terms of researching processes and outcomes in Religious Education. This observation implies both, a corresponding new research interest as well as the actual possibility of carrying out research that leads to valid results on processes and outcomes in Religious Education. Our own approach at Tübingen as described in several chapters of the book has favored intervention studies which appear to be very promising in this respect and therefore, at least from our point of view, should come to play a more prominent role in religious education. Yet no single approach can or should be called normative in the sense of claiming it as the ideal form of doing research. Any approach chosen for a research project can only be justified and appreciated against the background of the actual aims and research questions to be pursued. No design and no methodology will fit all purposes.

Our third observation is about such aims and research questions in the field of religious education. It obviously is important to be aware of the reasons for asking certain questions and for pursuing aims like finding out about processes and outcomes in Religious Education. The analyses offered in this volume show that there can be different rationales behind similar research questions and that this is also true in the case of doing research on processes and outcomes in Religious Education. On the one hand, there is the apprehension that emphasising outcomes and the testing of outcomes could lead to a one-sided and narrow view of Religious Education, for example, in the sense of the notorious “teaching to the test” or of neglecting the vi-

tal importance of actual classroom procedures, creative styles of teaching, personal relationships, etc. On the other hand, it would be difficult if not impossible to argue that there should be a school subject which, opposed to all other subjects, is exempt from all critical questions concerning what can be learned in this subject and if there is any evidence to prove that, at least in part, its aims are actually reached in teaching it. Following the descriptions in this volume, it can be said that indeed any kind of teaching to the test should be excluded but that nevertheless, in the interest of the pupils who have to attend school on a mandatory basis, Religious Education must be able to clearly explain possible learning outcomes and to produce some kind of evidence for such outcomes. Moreover, since not all teaching approaches will turn out to be equally effective, there is the obligation for religious education as an academic discipline to find out, together with the practitioners, which approaches or strategies recommend themselves more than others.

This last point leads on directly to our fourth observation, concerning the need for combining research on outcomes with research on classroom processes. It is one of the limitations of large-scale studies like the PISA studies that they are concerned with outcomes while not being able to capture the teaching and learning processes which, in one way or another, have led to the respective outcomes. Especially from the perspective of subject-oriented didactics – in the present case, the didactics of Religious Education –, however, the decisive question must be how teaching and learning in Religious Education can become such that outcomes will improve. In other words, it is the interrelationship between classroom processes and outcomes which should be at the center of interest. Moreover, in many cases this implies that different approaches to shaping such processes have to be evaluated empirically.

Our fifth observation is about methodology. It actually comprises a number of aspects which deserve further consideration and discussion in studying classroom processes and outcomes in Religious Education. At this point we limit ourselves to briefly introduce them:

- Concerning research on processes and outcomes in Religious Education, both *qualitative* and *quantitative* approaches are needed. There can be no general preference for one or the other approach. The choice must fully depend on the aims to be pursued in a particular research project. In many cases, a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches is useful.
- Especially concerning outcomes of Religious Education, there is a clear need for results which can be generalised. It seems that *generalisations* cannot be avoided in this case because results cannot be meaningfully interpreted without comparisons which, in turn, require results that can be generalised. Although certain kinds of qualitative research allow for generalisations as well, it is easier to achieve *representativity* by using quantitative approaches. For uncovering the detailed tissue-like structures of teaching and learning processes, qualitative approaches should take the lead.
- Educational research, be it on Religious Education or on other subjects, often

implies some kind of *comparisons*. Such comparisons can be of interest at various different levels, for example, concerning teaching strategies, the influence of different learning groups, the effects of teaching materials, different temporal structuring of lessons, etc. Methodologically, valid comparisons are very challenging. It seems that research on processes and outcomes in Religious Education is only at the beginning in this respect.

- Even more challenging are issues of possible *causalities*. Yet referring to processes and outcomes in Religious Education, most naturally leads into such questions which, at this point, can hardly be answered at an academic level but which, in the practice of teaching, are in fact answered every day. Which teaching strategies will be more effective? Which learning presuppositions fit best with which teaching approach? What are possible negative effects of certain approaches and how can they be reduced or avoided? To reach an understanding of teaching Religious Education based on a broad familiarity with such causalities clearly is not a goal that can be reached in a short amount of time – probably so-called evidence-based teaching is not a reasonable goal at all. Yet to gain at least some more insights into possible causalities should still be an aim for future research on teaching, including Religious Education.
- While certain results depend on representative samples and therefore, on large-scale studies, *case studies* remain important as well. Case studies allow for discovering effects not yet known, for taking account of multiple contexts and for interpretations which are close to the personal experiences of both teachers and pupils. Moreover, case studies are useful for teaching purposes because for many people they offer a more palpable reality than just statistics.
- The role of *normative issues* always has to be kept in mind, especially with Religious Education. Empirical research is not a way of escaping normative questions and decisions. Already the questionnaires used in many studies carry with them many normative assumptions and, in a certain sense, they incorporate them, possibly even to a degree which gives priority to the normative over the empirical. The identification of “right” and “wrong” answers is one example, the choice of appropriate attitudes is another. Since it is not possible to avoid such assumptions it is even more important to be aware of their character and to address them in critical discourse.
- In a more general sense, the question of normative assumptions refers to what is good teaching in Religious Education. There is a clear need for *quality criteria for good Religious Education* as practice of teaching and learning. Increasingly, such criteria should be based on general, if possible, international expert discussions.
- The same can be said, although in different ways, about *research on Religious Education*. In this case, the *criteria* should be both based on theory as well as on methodological considerations. Again, such criteria should be based on international discussions.
- Finally and obviously, even the best research will only be of use if it is taken up in the practice of Religious Education. But the actual *reception of research* is not

only a practical or political problem, it should also become the object of study. How can what kind of research translate into practice? What kind of cooperation between theory/research and practice is needed for this purpose?, etc. In studying processes of the reception of research, one has to keep in mind that there is possible impact, but also neglect or even abuse of research results. Concerning Religious Education, very little is known so far about such effects which are well-known from other fields of educational research and policy.

3. General observations

Summing up the observations and considerations presented in the preceding section and connecting them to the religious education discussion in a broader sense, a number of points can be emphasised. In the following, in correspondence to the present context, these points are phrased in reference to empirical research. Readers should be aware, however, that most of them apply to all kinds of scientific research, be it empirical, historical, analytical or comparative research.

Empirical research is contextual. As the results from empirical research on Religious Education presented in this volume (for instance from Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands and especially from Norway) clearly show, empirical research – like all other types especially of social-scientific research – is shaped by the contextual conditions and circumstances of the respective country. This becomes especially clear once the general framework of schooling and Religious Education is taken into account. The legal conditions for the subject differ considerably between countries or different regions (cf. Rothgangel, Jäggle and Schlag 2016; Rothgangel, Jackson and Jäggle 2014; Rothgangel, Skeie and Jäggle 2014). Just as divergent are the forms in which Religious Education is carried out on this basis, as well as the didactical approaches which are applied within the various forms of Religious Education. Thus, empirical research is never “neutral” in relationship to context. It always originates from a special social and political context, it is often guided by certain interests and is closely connected to different epistemological perspectives (cf. Heger 2017). The specific perspective of the researchers determines the research question, the methodology and the overall orientation of the research.

At the same time, as mentioned above, it has also become clear that empirical research can very easily be used and abused for certain interests, e. g., for political reasons. To reinforce the power of the arguments used in political conflicts and debates, politicians tend to refer to certain empirical studies which offer results in support of their arguments. Other studies are left aside or withheld. Researchers should be aware of the potentials, risks and limits of scientific work even before starting their research. Contextual circumstances, conditions and pre-conditions are part of the research process, in the case of empirical approaches just like with all other scientific approaches.

Empirical research needs a solid theoretical framework. All empirical studies and reflections collected in this volume show great sensitivity for the theoretical framework of their research. The theoretical concepts are an essential basis for successful empirical research. This includes epistemological reflections as well as profound analysis of the terminology used, the theories, prior research, one's own theoretical point of view and goals. The examples from Sweden, Norway and Germany in particular show the interrelationship between empirical research and theoretical presuppositions and goals. This interrelationship also holds the risk that the researchers' goals can predetermine the results in an illegitimate manner. In this case, the teachers or pupils do or say exactly what the researchers want them to do or say during the research process because the questions they are asked already predetermine the answers. Here, the self-reflective ability of the research group is needed as a crucial element for clearly pointing out the interests and presuppositions as well as for critically discussing the research results. Such considerations lead on to a third point.

Empirical research needs a clear normative basis. The dependency of empirical research on theoretical presuppositions reminds us of the fact that research is always guided by normative orientations which, in theology and religious education, are also called "options". For instance, the studies conducted at Tübingen University or in the Netherlands presuppose the decision of researchers that interreligious learning is urgently needed in our time and society. Young people experience religion and the positive or negative coexistence of persons with different religious affiliations at school and therefore should be familiarised with different religious traditions. It is equally important for interreligious learning processes that the pupils will be given the opportunity to reflect on the meaning of religion and, ideally, to get to know authentic representatives of different religions. They should acquire the competence to take the other person's perspective and to learn to see themselves through the other person's eyes. The basic option behind such empirical settings is that of interreligious understanding (cf. e. g. Barnes and Davis 2015; Schweitzer 2014; Engebretson et al. 2010).

Another example is the commitment to supporting pupils in their personal and individual development which is regarded as essential for Religious Education (Boschki 2017). Commitment to the person and to the advancement of becoming a subject must be the categorical imperative of all Religious Education (cf. Schröder 2012, 232–249). Empirical research makes such basic normative orientations a presupposition and motivation for its research projects. Researchers must be aware of these basic options and should make them transparent to the wider public as well.

Empirical research is based on hypotheses. This statement may initially sound trivial but is of vital importance for the research process. Quite often the underlying hypotheses are not fleshed out clearly enough. Research hypotheses are decisive for the methodological design, the composition of samples, the concrete methods of the research (e. g. quantitative vs. qualitative methods or bringing both together) and the

methods for evaluating the data. It is important to see that the hypotheses are guided in particular by expectations as well as by the normative stances mentioned above, although these two aspects are not identical. With regard to the Tübingen research projects on processes and outcomes in Religious Education, for example, the guiding normative ideas of interreligious understanding must be specified as hypotheses in relation to the concrete situation of the field under examination (training of caregivers, childcare workers, or other kinds of professional training). However, it must also be considered that:

Empirical research needs manifold methodologies. As emphasised in our introduction to this volume and as shown in the reports from different countries, a central message of this book is the plea for multi-perspective approaches in the sense of manifold methodologies in research in the field of Religious Education. Since educational processes are highly complex, people are very diverse, and learning groups are very much heterogeneous (Grümme 2017), research also is in need of a whole variety of different approaches. Different methodologies entail different perspectives – for instance, teacher interviews, pupil interviews, video analyses, etc. – and each perspective can reveal a certain part of the complex processes in the classroom. No single perspective, however, can capture the entire situation. Not even all perspectives and methodological settings taken together can ever amount to a complete picture. Blank spots will always remain.

4. Perspectives for the future

At the end of this volume, three perspectives seem to be of special importance:

- First of all, we want to repeat the plea which has been made at a number of points throughout this volume, that more research on classroom processes and outcomes in Religious Education is needed. This kind of research is very complex, sometimes it requires years of preparation and it implies demanding interdisciplinary collaboration with researchers from empirical educational research and educational psychology. But it is worthwhile to make such efforts because this research can lead to important results for the theory and practice of Religious Education in the future.
- The present volume is a first step towards international cooperation in the field of research on processes and outcomes in Religious Education in that it brings together authors with similar interests from a number of European countries. The next step would be to initiate new joint research projects which could investigate classroom processes and structures on the basis of international samples and data. Concerning classroom processes, there have been interesting beginnings (cf., for example, ter Avest et al. 2009). Concerning outcomes of RE, no results are available yet.

- This volume is about Religious Education in school. Even if this is the field on which most empirical research in religious education has been concentrating so far, many research lacunas have been identified in this volume. Yet considering the field of religious education as a whole, i. e., including what in certain countries has been called religious nurture or religious socialisation, the lacunas are even more numerous and more severe. Applying a different terminology which has become common in general education (cf., for example, Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung 2008), Religious Education in school can be considered as *formal religious education*. It is then distinguished from *informal religious education*, for example, in the family or through the media. The third variety is *non-formal religious education*, for example, in organised youth groups or in confirmation work. Formal education is highly organised, institutionalised and planned; participation is mandatory. The opposite is true for informal education although, in certain ways, it is the most influential type of education. Non-formal education is not mandatory; it is institutionalised and planned to some degree but never like formal education. In recent general education, non-formal education has been appreciated in new ways which, so far, has not been paralleled by research in religious education (cf. Schweitzer 2017). This is surprising in that it is most likely that non-formal (as well as informal) religious education is very influential for Religious Education as well.

Readers will not be surprised that this volume ends with a plea for more research. Yet in the field of Religious Education, indeed much remains to be done if religious education wants to continue with its efforts of becoming a serious research discipline.

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